Reconciliation Between Women After Genocide

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by
Liv Randall

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Project Advisor: Dr. Hollie Nyseth Brehm, Department of Sociology
Secondary Advisor: Dr. Morgan Liu, Department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures

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Abstract

There has been a growing number of academic works related to the shifting gender roles of women after mass violence and genocide, including how changing roles affect women's agency. However, there is little written on reconciliation processes undertaken by women after such events. Using Rwanda as a case study, I conducted 25 in-depth interviews with women who are members of all-women's cooperatives or related groups, such as community or church organizations. I analyze their reasons for joining these organizations, as well as the benefits gained from the women's respective organizations. I find that women join women's cooperatives and groups for economic purposes, to find a sense of community, or to reconcile with other women in the organization. The benefits women obtain from the groups include economic stability from earnings or savings groups, as well as mental stability from having a place to share past traumatic experiences and general life problems. These economic and mental benefits women receive from women's cooperatives and groups created after the 1994 Genocide Against the Tutsi assist women in their personal reconciliation process, whether they have been harmed or had family members who have harmed during the genocide. This study aligns with current research regarding the agency of women in post-conflict societies, and how agency is utilized during the reconciliation and reconstruction process of a country. Additionally, this study adds to existing literature by discussing how women utilize agency in post-conflict Rwanda through the creation of various women's organizations, and how these organizations not only benefit participants economically and mentally, but assist in the individual's personal reconciliation process.

Introduction

In 1994, the small East-African country of Rwanda experienced one hundred days of bloodshed that would later be titled, "The 1994 Genocide Against the Tutsi."[1] Over one million Tutsi and Hutu were murdered over the three-month time period. The majority of those killed or sent to prison after the genocide were men, leaving behind hundreds of thousands of women to take care of their families and rebuild their communities. These were women in rural areas, who generally did not have the socio-economic status to leave their homes and start over somewhere new. Following the genocide, survivors and family members of perpetrators created all-women's cooperatives and groups for supportive and economic reasons.

In this study, I will analyze 25 interviews with women in Rwanda who are involved in a women's organization or a cooperative consisting of all female members. These groups include cooking and clothing cooperatives, a cooperative created for reconciliation purposes, as well as church or community groups. I seek to answer two questions: 1) What were the initial reasons for joining a women's cooperative or women's group? and 2) What were the benefits women gained after joining their organization?

I will analyze the various factors that led to a woman's choice to join their respective organization, such as for economic purposes, to find a sense of community, and to reconcile with others. In my analysis, I will argue that grassroots organizations created specifically for women

[1] This is the official title of the genocide that the Rwandan government created. I hesitate to use the official title because it assumes that the only victims of the genocide were Tutsi. However, after in-depth study of the genocide, academics realize that victims of this atrocity were not merely Tutsi, but also many Hutu that were forced to participate, or who were punished/killed for refusing to participate. I use the official title created by the Rwandan government out of respect for the government and the Tutsi who were killed. Yet, I recognize that that while Tutsi were the targeted group, they were not the only victims.

after the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi lead to participants' economic and mental stability, contributing to their journey toward reconciliation as a whole.[2]

In addition to exploring how women's cooperatives benefitted women individually, I will briefly explain the general history of Rwanda and the genocide, as well as focus on the shift of gender roles, for women in particular, before and after the genocide. This will help the reader better contextualize the findings of this process. Finally, I will briefly consider the application of this reconciliation process to countries outside of Rwanda, and whether or not the cooperatives studied can be implemented in those countries as well.

Literature Review

Rwanda's History

When Rwanda was colonized by Germany in 1884, eighty-five percent of the Rwandan population was Hutu, fifteen percent was Tutsi, and about one percent was Twa. These demographic percentages were largely consistent until the genocide. Originally, these ethnicities were simply titles of social status, and not classifications of separate ethnicities. Before colonization, to be classified a Tutsi meant having at least ten cows. As pastoralists in society, the Tutsi people tended to be wealthier and higher in social status. Hutu were farmers and agriculturalists, and therefore had less wealth and status. They would be considered part of the middle to lower class. Lastly, the Twa lived mainly in the forests as hunter-gathers and were seen as lesser than the rest of the population (Pottier 2002). The relationships between groups were more-so symbiotic than not, and when Germany asserted power in Rwanda, they did so from afar.

[2] Reconciliation can be understood in the Rwandan context as asking for forgiveness or forgiving someone who has been harmed or who has harmed, and moving forward in a productive and communal way.

Germany did however create a greater binary between Tutsi and Hutu by favoring the Tutsi ethnicity for having a history of socio-economic power in Rwanda, as well as the perception of slightly more European features than their Hutu counter-parts, such as lighter skin or smaller noses. This followed the new trend of eugenics, or the science of improving humans through the breeding of specific, generally "white" traits, which interested prominent European scholars at the time (Fujii 2004). Despite the Germans ruling from another continent, they held power over Rwandans by introducing ethnic divides and power struggles. Before Germany colonized the small East-African country, Rwandans did not have a sense of race or hold an inherent superiority due to facial features, height, and skin tone. Instead, Rwandans saw the Tutsi, Hutu, and Twa groups as socio-economic statuses that could be entered or exited depending on factors such as the number of cows a person owned. In the context of marriage, if a Hutu woman were to marry a Tutsi man, she would then be considered Tutsi, again illustrating that these identities were fluid (Burnet 2012). However, during and after colonial rule, a Rwandan's ethnic identity would be made permanent (Des Forges 1999).

When Germany was forced to relinquish control of its colonized countries after World War I, Belgium gained control of Rwanda and Burundi, and began implementing a more direct colonial rule (Des Forges 1999). Belgium emphasized the concept of race in Rwanda, classifying Tutsi as the elite due to their European features—such as lighter skin tone, smaller noses, and more lean stature—while Hutu were perceived as the lesser race. Belgian colonialists granted Tutsi with better jobs and educational opportunities as a reward for being a more dominant race, so resentment and tension developed as the Hutu felt they were inferior (Mamdani 2001). Propaganda spread throughout the country highlighting the Tutsi elitism causing tension between Rwandans. In addition to propaganda used to develop separatism between the two groups,

Belgium would issue ID cards that stated each Rwandans ethnic identity, and would later be used to identify Tutsi during the genocide (Des Forges 1999).

A revolution led by the Tutsi elite, who sought colonial independence, took place in 1959 (Hintjens 2001). Due to the retaliation from the controlling ethnic group, Belgium began supporting the Hutu in power, and their newly found control over the government, as well as greater educational opportunities. An election was held in 1960, and Hutu politicians gained majority rule, dramatically changing the political structures that had favored Tutsi for previous decades. Hutu radicals and government officials turned to kill the Tutsi in massacres as a form of revenge after years of oppression. Hutu President Grégoire Kayibanda was elected into office in 1962, however a coup in 1973 quickly ended Kayibanda's term, and placed Hutu president Habyarimana into power. In 1990, the Rwandan Patriotic Army (RPA), composed of Tutsi refugees, began a civil war against the Hutu government (Newbury 1995). In 1993, President Habyarimana was pressured into signing the Arusha Peace Accords, since neither side of the war had been victorious in achieving their goals for three years. A cease-fire had been agreed upon at the Arusha Accords between the Republic of Rwanda and the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), however on the evening of April 6th, President Habyarimana's plane was shot down. After the death of the Hutu president, as well as years of derogatory propaganda against the Tutsi, Hutu's were called to participate in the systematic killing of all Tutsi's. Many soon-to-be perpetrators felt obliged to listen to their government and eradicate the Tutsi population (Straus 2006).

100 Days of Genocide

During the one-hundred days of violence, many perpetrators were not motivated to kill because of ethnic hatred, but because they were either afraid of what would happen to them or

their families if they did not participate[3]. There was also a strong sense of ethnic justice that perpetrators sought out, and lastly, many people participated for material gain. Perpetrators looted houses and stole livestock, and eventually turned to killing due to a "kill or be killed" mentality (Nyseth Brehm 2016).

Roadblocks would be set up in order to check everyone's ID who tried to pass. Someone could have a Hutu ID card, but if they displayed distinguishing features considered to be common with Tutsi, they could be killed on the spot (Holmes 2018). Thousands of Tutsi would hide in stadiums, schools, or churches for safety during the killings; however, these locations would end up being the largest killings sites within the country (Berry 2018).

Various other hiding locations for Tutsi individuals included swamps, rescuer's homes, and neighboring countries such as Burundi, Tanzania, Uganda, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo[4]. If Tutsi victims could not successfully hide or flee the country, then they would be killed with machetes, guns, grenades, or beaten and left to die in pit latrines, swamps, or amongst groups of Tutsi that had already been murdered. Some victims were lucky enough to survive in these heinous conditions until the Rwandan Patriotic Army (today known as the Rwandan Patriotic Front) took over and brought the survivors to a safe zone, protected by the RPF (Berry 2018).

Aftermath of the Genocide

On July 4, 1994, the RPF had gained control of the country and the genocide had ended. At the time, it was estimated that nearly half a million people were murdered during the one-

[3] The genocide was more or less 100 days depending on the location in Rwanda, however it is often rounded to 100 days because the round number sounds catchier.

[4] A rescuer in Rwanda is someone with a Hutu ethnicity who saved Tutsi during the genocide. Examples of this includes hiding Tutsi in one's home or fields, or helping lead Tutsi to borders safely.

hundred day time span. However, this estimate has continuously risen and now experts say that over a million Hutu and Tutsi were killed during the genocide (Berry 2018).

Sexualized violence was a tool used by Hutu extremists to commit genocide (Burnet 2012). Rape was used as a tool to "destroy the ethnic 'other' by eliminating its source: women's biological capacity to reproduce" (Berry 2018:52). While Tutsi women are known as the victims, both Hutu and Tutsi women suffered violence. These acts included rape, sexual slavery, sexual mutilation with objects such as machetes and gun barrels, and gang rapes among other acts of sexualized violence (Fein 1999). Over a quarter of a million women were raped, and in many accounts, women were murdered immediately after the sexual violence. If women were "allowed" to survive, it was because it was assumed they would die from sexually transmitted diseases, they would be unable to reproduce ever again, or they would eventually "die of sadness" (HRW 1996:43).

Not long after the genocide, the RPF created the "Government of National Unity" that divided federal power between Hutu and Tutsi (Berry 2018). A major goal of the new government was to bring back Hutu who had fled the country out of fear of retaliation from the RPF and genocide survivors, and begin unity and reconciliation efforts. Once the Rwandans who fled the country (both Hutu and Tutsi) began returning, the government created a justice system that convicted perpetrators at the community level for their crimes (Bornkamm 2012).

The Gacaca Courts were a transitional justice system created with the intent of prosecuting hundreds of thousands of genocidaires in a fair and speedy process (Clark 2010). The courts took take place in each community with an elected judge. Suspects were brought to the courts, and eye witnesses in the community testified as to whether or not the suspect participated in the genocide. If the suspect admitted to their crimes, they received a shorter

prison sentence, and then lived in TIG working camps, before they were sent back into society (Bornkamm 2012)[5].

Gender Roles

For the following section, I will once again be going back in time to clarify the gendered historical context needed to understand this study. In order to understand women after the genocide, it is necessary to understand how gender has changed in Rwanda throughout time.

Before 1994 – Traditional Patriarchy

Gender roles during colonial rule were typical to that of patriarchal agrarian societies in the region at the time. As opposed to men, who were in charge of heavy labor and looking after livestock, women were expected to cook, clean, retrieve water, and take care of the children (Burnet 2018). Hutu women in particular often had to engage in demanding work such as cultivating land to grow crops, whereas the elite Tutsi women had a more comfortable life than the poorer Tutsi and Hutu women. They were not expected to engage in as much physically demanding labor. Elite Tutsi women often had a house maid that lived within the home and took on vigorous tasks. The girls who took up this line of work would often come from families lower on the socio-economic spectrum (Berry 2018).

Women had a role in supporting the family financially due to their shared contribution on farms and in small family businesses. However, the male spouse had sole control over any money earned. Rwandan women also had no legal rights to their own property and land holdings; only the head of the household could own land, and women could never be considered the head

[5] TIG is a program in Rwanda that allows genocidaires to serve all or part of their sentences doing community service projects, such as the reconstruction of infrastructure within the country

of their own house[6] (Berry 2018). Generally, women were not afforded the agency to be anything other than a wife and mother (Wallace 2008).

After independence from Belgium, women in Rwanda began to advocate for more representation in the government and in the development of the country (Burnet 2012). The percentage of women in the parliament rose from 12.9% in 1983, to 15.7% in 1988. However, the parliament barely had any role within the government, since President Habyarimana's elite inner-circle secretly ran the country (Berry 2018). Women also gained the right to vote after their independence, but they continued to be controlled by men in many other aspects of life (Wallace 2008). It was not until after the genocide, when a great percentage of the country's men were either dead or in prison, when women attained full agency in their lives (Hunt 2014).

After 1994 – Permanent Changes for Women

Historically, when there is a gender imbalance due to events such as war or genocide, women seize the opportunity and accept extra tasks in society that men would usually perform. For example, in the U.S. during WWII, women had the opportunity to assume workforce and household tasks that the men fighting in the war typically held. However, when men returned from the war, women were to reassume their roles as housewife and mother. Many American women wanted to adopt these progressive new roles permanently, but it would be decades before changing American gender roles would be accepted (Hall 2015). In the case of Rwanda, the men either never came back, or would not be readmitted into society for years. This meant that the role of women after the genocide faced a major shift (Berry 2017).

Besides the gender imbalance, there was a massive displacement of men, women, and children after the violence. Many women who were alone with their children had nowhere to go

[6] When asked who the head of the household was before the genocide, many of the women interviewed would laugh at the question, and respond that the head was, of course, their husband.

when the genocide ended (Wallace 2008). This led to the creation of grassroots organizations, comprised of both Hutu and Tutsi women.[7] Many of the organizations were created for economic purposes, so that the women, who were now heads of their households, could keep themselves and their families alive (Berry 2018).

Some of the new responsibilities that women obtained included "milking cows, replant[ing] fallow gardens, make[ing] bricks, reroof[ing] their houses, and sell[ing] anything they could to generate an income" (Burnet 2012:67). The immense amount of work adopted by women is what led women to create grassroots organizations for "basic economic, emotional, and legal support" (Berry 2018:74). Without the willingness to create these associations, families would have struggled much longer than they had after the genocide.

Politically, more women had opportunities to be involved in their local or national government (Burnet 2008). After the genocide, women were seen as the peacemakers, and men were seen as the aggressive fighters who perpetuated the violence. As peacemakers, women were viewed as the ones who could attain leadership positions within the government, to help rebuild their country and keep violence from reoccurring. Currently, Rwanda is known to have the highest percentage of women in any national parliament (Berry 2015).[8]

This study addresses the organizations created by women after the genocide, and will analyze the initial reasons women seek to join such organizations, such as economic or communal benefits. Furthermore, this study will highlight the benefits women obtained after

[7] A grassroots organization is one that is created at the very basic level of society. They are not created by any institution, elite group, or political power, but by those in society at the most local level.

[8] It's important to note that women in parliament is more of symbol to the international community and general public showing the countries strength and equality within government. I say symbol because the parliament does not have the agency within government that one would assume it does. The Rwandan parliament often vote for what President Paul Kagame suggests they vote for. This may sound problematic, but to the people of Rwanda, especially the women, the female power within parliament is more of an inspiration than anything else.

joining their specific group, including economic and mental stability, as well as how those benefits supported women during their path toward reconciliation.

Methods

Research Site and Sample

I visited Rwanda for three weeks in 2018 studying the causes, consequences, and aftermath of the 1994 Genocide Against the Tutsi. I returned for six weeks, from June to July, in 2019 to conduct independent research on reconciliation between women after genocide. I conducted 25 semi-structured interviews with women who were part of some type of women's organization, such as a cooperative, church group, or community group. In addition, I selected participants from both rural and urban areas to account for discrepancies in implementation between the two types of areas, as further described below.

To facilitate data collection, I employed a Rwandan translator who is also the founder of a women's cooperative. His experience with his own cooperative helped me when looking for other organizations to work with for the interviews. My translator previously worked on projects tied to reconciliation, and has extensive experience in interview techniques that include Kinyarwanda-to-English consistency amongst several other translators. My translator is a survivor from a mixed, Hutu-Tutsi, background, who has had close ties to women's cooperatives around Rwanda.

Working with my translator, I selected participants based on snowball sampling. We began with the women's cooperative he founded, and he contacted two members who were willing to be interviewed. After these interviews, my translator reached out to multiple women's cooperatives for individuals who would be willing to be interviewed. Six of the interviews were

from a cooperative I had visited during my first stay in Rwanda; my translator reached out to that organization for those individuals.

Out of the 25 interviews, 12 took place at my translator's cooperative in the Nyamagabe District of Kigali, 7 took place in a participant's house in the Nyamagabe District in Kigali, and 6 took place at a hostel in the Huye District of the Southern Provine of Rwanda. It's important to note that after the genocide, districts were renamed and remapped. The Nyamagabe District was formerly known as the Gikongoro Province, and Huye was formerly known as Butare. These districts were two of the hardest-hit areas during the genocide (Nyseth Brehm, 2017). Controlling for high rates in a particular district was done in order to find participants who likely participated in a personal reconstruction and reconciliation process.

Interviews were conducted in Kinyarwanda. After consenting to the study, participants were asked a series of open-ended questions such as how life was before the violence began, life during the violence, experiences in their respective organizations, and about unity and reconciliation.

All participants identified as women and ranged in age from 30-69 years, with a mean age of 21 during the genocide. All women had children at some point in their lives, and all of the women but one had been married at some point in their lives. Sixteen women were in a women's cooperative at some point since the genocide, 6 women were in either in an all-women's church group or community group after the genocide, and 3 women were not affiliated with any women's group or organization. Fifteen women interviewed are survivors of the 1994 Genocide Against the Tutsi, and the 10 remaining individuals were not participants, however they were not targeted. This study sought to understand what mechanisms women used to reach reconciliation

after the genocide; therefore, all women were invited to participate, whether they were in a women's group or not.

The majority of women who participated in this study were lower to middle socio-economic status'. It's suggested by a couple of the participants that upper-class women tend to not participate in cooperatives or groups looked at in this study, because they were not pressured financially to join. Meaning upper-class Rwandan women had resources to take care of themselves and their families without the support of addition cooperatives or women's groups. However, since the majority of women interviewed were not considered to have a higher socio-economic status, this theory could not be tested thoroughly.

It's important to note how being a young, American women may have effected interviews. It appeared that the women interviewed wanted to represent Rwanda's reconciliation efforts as successful due to government efforts taken after the genocide, and to show someone from the West how far the country had come. Additionally, women were incredibly proud of their organizations, so they hardly gave any negative comments regarding their cooperatives or groups. This may have steered answers to be more positive than they might have been if I was not an American, however the women interviewed did feel comfortable talking to my Rwandan translator, which hopefully presented more honest responses. I also believe that the women interviewed were more comfortable with me being a young woman trying to learn from them, than if I were a man conducting research.

Data Analysis

I recruited and trained a small group of undergraduate research assistants to transcribe the audio files of interviews conducted. All identifying information was redacted from transcripts and pseudonyms were randomly assigned to participants. I then coded my interviews to find key

themes in each participant's experiences. I used NVivo qualitative data analysis software to code my interviews and find key themes in each participant's experiences. The nodes I used to organize each code include childhood, community before 1994, early adulthood, experiences during and discussion of genocide, life after 1994, discussion of women's cooperative, discussion of reconciliation, and a general/miscellaneous section. The themes that emerged include, initial reasons for joining women's groups, mental stability, economic stability, and individualized reconciliation.

Findings

Women who join all-women's cooperatives or groups have various reasons for becoming members of these organizations, such as economic benefits, for reconciliation purposes, and to connect with others in the community. Some women gave multiple reasoning for joining their groups, such as economic growth, as well as connecting with other women in the community. The individuals who participate in these groups often obtain what they initially join the group for, in addition to unexpected benefits. These include reaching an economic stability/empowerment, achieving a mental stability through conversations of past traumas, and eventually women feel they are ready to reconcile with those that had been harmed or those family members who have harmed during the genocide.

Reasons for Joining Cooperatives/Groups

When women come together, whether in cooperatives or community and church groups, they have varying reasons for becoming members. Following the genocide, there were specific themes as to why each woman decided to join. For example, the women in the Courage of Living cooperative joined for reconciliation purposes, while the women who joined the cooking

cooperative joined for economic reasons. The individuals who participate in church or community groups often join initially to create a sense of community and family.

Three of the individuals interviewed were members of the women's cooperative, Bridge of Hope, which seeks to empower single women throughout Rwanda by teaching them how to make clothing and other Rwandan products. Chasily, a Bridge of Hope member, stated that she "wanted to come and learn new skills, so that afterward I could practice and take care of herself and her son." Many women who join cooperatives specifically do so in order to reach financial stability for themselves and their family. Cynthia joined her cooking cooperative in 2016, and describes why she decided to join,

> I wanted to do something after leaving the health [industry]. I wanted to do something that would give me money and not ask her to work so hard. We work so hard, and because of her age she thought she can do something that brings income, but not really working for someone else, and to be with others.

Cynthia's co-worker, Aurore, also joined the cooking cooperative to "improve [her] economic status".

However, in a cooperative such as Courage of Living, established only one year after the genocide, women come together in order to reconcile and make peace. Courage of Living began in 1995 in the Southern Province of Rwanda, and started with widows in the area getting together to discuss and process their trauma. With the help of a priest, the wives of perpetrators in the community approached the widows to try and reconcile. It was months before the widows agreed to meet with the wives of perpetrators, and the widows began to forgive once the wives began sharing information about killings that occurred in the area. This information was useful in the Gacaca courts and helped bring closure for many of the wives. For the women who are wives

of perpetrators in Courage of Living, reconciliation was the first goal that had to be met before they could begin rebuilding their lives and the community together. According to one Courage of Living member, Giselle, "the main purpose for me was meeting the survivors, talking to them, and telling them what happened, so that I could heal, because she was heartbroken."

For the women who are widows in Courage of Living, the initial goal in the cooperative was to be with the other women who had survived and share each other's traumas. It was about a year after the genocide, when the widows felt safe enough to meet with the wives of perpetrators and reconcile. For Courage of Living member, Josiane, "the main motivation was not reconciliation, because no one was thinking about that. It was an association with other genocide widows to get together and develop a platform to support each other". Josiane goes on to discuss how long it took for her and the other widows to trust the wives of perpetrators in the community again, stating,

> It took a long time, almost a year, but the trust was built well, because they told me the truth. I thought they were lying until they showed my family members, where they were buried, in the toilets and everywhere, because it helped me to know, to see the bodies of my family members.

Once the trust was built, Josiane and the other widows could move forward toward reconciliation with the wives of perpetrators.

As for the women in community and church groups, many of the women who joined sought a sense of community and family. Diane, who participates in an all-women's church group, states that she joined her group because "[the women in the group] have particular conversation and discuss about how to raise the children, or how to leave their husband"; there is a particular sense of comradery that can be found in women's organizations. Flora lives in the

Southern Province of Rwanda and joined an all-women's group in her community in 2015. She joined the group because "she was lonely" and hoped to connect with women outside of her family. She also wanted to "develop [herself] and what [she] could do to earn money", which falls into the description of many women who join cooperatives specifically to develop their economic standings.

Economic Stability

Every participant of this study achieved some type of economic benefit from the women's organization they had joined. The previous section expanded on the initial reasoning women gave for joining their groups. This section will look at one of the two major benefits the women found by joining a group or cooperative, that is, achieving economic stability.

After the genocide, many women were left to take care of themselves and their families, and to do this, they would need to find ways to earn money. A woman earning her own money was a new right for her due to the shifting gender ratios throughout the country. Many women created cooperatives for economic purposes, and women in church and community groups would often combine their savings to be used in case one individual were to need the money.

Josiane, a widowed member of Courage of Living describes the economic benefits she received when joining her cooperative in 1995. She says,

> This association helped paying school fees and materials for some of their children. Some of the children were covered by the government, but the other children were not, so they supported them. We had children who survived by themselves, this association put food together and when the kids would come, they would have somewhere to get food. The cooperative helped buy health insurance, we have helped people build houses when we were still strong. Now we can't, but we have done a lot.

Nadege believes the Courage of Living cooperative also helped her economically stating,

> We were working together, and doing activities together, and doing other small businesses together – of course including farming and having small businesses together even if we don't have farms anymore. We share when good comes, and when bad comes. We don't really care who is who, we help each other.

Thacienne reiterates how Courage of Living helped the women economically, stating,

> We would support each other, farming together, helping the children, or helping women who don't have any child, and doing saving groups together, so the point that is we all felt like we were helping other family members.

For the women who joined Courage of Living, economic improvement was crucial to the women immediately after the genocide. Later this study will look at the additional mental benefits of joining the cooperative, and how the economic and mental stability led to members reconciling with one another.

Claudine, a Bridge of Hope member since 2017, describes the ways in which the cooperative was useful to her, saying "economically it helped me, because the money I make here, I pay school fees, buy health insurance, or other household activities, and then working here taught me to learn more". One of the cooking cooperative founders, Therese, started the organization in 2015 in order to "take care of her family" financially. Therese's husband had recently passed away, and with the new rights women acquired after the genocide, she used her professional training in cooking to open a catering cooperative for women. Within the cooperative there is an extra savings account for members who need extra money for themselves or their family, similar to what was described earlier. Alice, a member of Therese's cooking cooperative, discusses the additional economic benefit of the organization. Besides the salary

each woman makes while she is working, “one of the things we do is they have a saving group that saves money. So, that is [used if] any one of them has a problem, they support each other.” Additionally, Alice believes this saving group leads to more trust between the women in the cooperative.

Flora, a 37-year-old survivor who resides in Rwanda’s Southern Province, participates in a women’s community group with both survivors and family members of perpetrators. Flora describes how the community group she belongs to has changed her life, saying “I am learning a lot about how you can develop yourself and what you can do to earn money and develop”, later adding that “they are teaching each other how to economically empower themselves. Their main goal is empowering economically”. Flora’s all-women’s community group does not have the savings account previously mentioned by other women; however, economic stability and “empowerment” is a critical component of the organization.

Economic stability was often tied to economic empowerment, and how a woman could gain the confidence and capacity to build themselves economically through their women’s organization. Josiane describes how Courage of Living “changed [her] life economically”, and how the women in the cooperative “do [their] projects together, and ask for loans from the banks, so they are working together towards economic empowerment.” Courage of Living gave Josiane the tools and resources to build herself economically, as well as the power to support herself economically as the head of the household.

In addition to the women discussing their traumas either before or after the genocide, the main goal of the organization is to empower women to grow and develop themselves for the future. Developing a “future self” is a theme of every cooperative or women’s group in this study.

Mental Stability

"Yes, [the cooperative] changed my life, because when I joined this association after losing my husband I was alone, but now I found other people who I share problems, and they comfort me so I feel comfortable and trusting," notes Tressy, a 39-year-old survivor in the cooking cooperative. Women, such as Tressy, have found a sense of community and family within their cooperatives and groups, where they have a support network of other trusted women. There is a vulnerability that is cultivated in the organizations due to each member's ability to trust and communicate past traumas with one another. Although women such as Tressy are survivors of the genocide, every group in this study had members who were survivors, as well as family members of genocidaires. The women's organizations are a safe place, for women to come together, communicate, and support one another. This section looks to explore how women's mental health is affected by the all-women's organization they participate in, as seen by the women who participated in this study.

In the cooperative, Courage of Living, every member had experienced trauma from the genocide. Two of the six women interviewed had lost their husbands, and the other four had husbands who were sent to prison for participating in the genocide. For these women, mental healing was necessary before reconciliation could occur. A large part of this mental healing came from the wives of perpetrators telling the widows what had happened to their family members. Thacienne, a member of Courage of Living, notes that, "[the widows] didn't receive the [wives] well, until we heard them telling the truth of what they did, apologize, so we were able to forgive them". When asked why she joined Courage of Living, Thaciennne explained it was to "not be so lonely, and meeting with others and talking to others, and receiving the ones she like, makes her join and stay". After reconciling with the wives of perpetrators, Thacienne had begun feeling

"peaceful" and began "helping the other women who [have] husbands in prison, to find food to feed her husband".

Nadine's husband was sent to prison after the genocide, and she felt the only way to move forward was to co-exist with the other women in her community. Through Courage of Living, the women would be trained on reconciliation, and given the opportunity to process their trauma through conversation with others. Nadine believes by rebuilding their mental and economic stability, the women in Courage of Living could "see [each other] as family" only years after the genocide occurred.

In Peace's cooking cooperative, members often share their experiences about the genocide or traumatic events that occurred after. Peace explains,

> Sometimes they sit together and talk through their stories and background. And sometimes they feel like they share their experience and it makes them feel good, and it makes them feel connected, because some share their stories and it makes you feel like "oh, this was not good" and it is even less painful. So, it helped them connect again.

Peace was asked if connecting with the other women in this way helped with her mental health, to which she notes "it helps, because it feels like a family she had made", who is there to support and connect with her.

Alice, describes how the cooking cooperative has helped with her mental health. Alice states, "before I was afraid, and not very free towards [other women]. I would even hide in different activities, but now I'm free. When they are sick, when they have events at their homes, I go and help. I participate and now I feel peaceful." This newfound freedom began for Peace from opening up to the other members of her cooperative about past experiences.

Pauline has been a member of her all-women's church organization since 2011, and she describes how the group has helped her mentally and physically over the years, stating,

> I don't feel so alone. If I get sick they will visit me. Even if I'm hungry, and don't have food, I feel comfortable telling them I don't have food, and I'm sure they will share with me. I consider them as sisters, and those who are older, I consider them my parents.

For many individuals who participated in this study, a common theme that came up when describing mental health was that their organization helped them feel "less lonely" or helped them create a new family. Overall, this sense of community and a support network where experiences and traumas can be shared and processed, is a key and recurring theme that every woman has encountered in their respective organizations.

Discussion

In the years following the 1994 Genocide Against the Tutsi, women had a newfound agency that allowed them to rebuild their lives in ways they could not do before the genocide. This included the creation of cooperatives and groups for women to come together and support one another mentally and economically. Women joined these groups for economic and communal purposes, and what they received from the groups included economic stability for each woman and her family, as well as a mental stability from having a space and community to help process their past trauma. This economic and mental stability helped each woman in this study reconcile with those that had been harmed or those family members who have harmed in the past, allowing the women to move further from the trauma they had experienced during the genocide.

Future research must engage participants from all 30 districts in Rwanda, as this study shares the findings from just two of those districts. Furthermore, additional research must account for women of all socio-economic status, as this study focused on women of lower- to middle-classes. While this is a case study of Rwanda, its research of the reconciliation between women after genocide, and the creation of women's organizations in post-conflict settings could extend to other countries that are in a post-conflict stage of reconstruction and reconciliation.

Conclusion

In 1994, hundreds of thousands of women in Rwanda were left alone to take care of themselves and their families, after a genocide against the Tutsis was carried out over a one-hundred day period. Their spouses, fathers, brothers, and other male counterparts were either killed or sent to prison for the crimes they committed.

Rwandan women had to survive in a new society, with newly adopted gender roles. Women no longer had to be confined to their homes, taking care of the children, with no control over their finances or land; they had to use these new rights in order to survive and take care of the new responsibilities they had acquired after the genocide.

With the right to be outspoken and empowered, Rwandan women took the opportunity to create grassroots organizations in order to take care of themselves and their families financially. However, the benefits of these organizations go further than simply creating financial stability. It is through the creation of these groups that women found a space in which they could trust one another and be honest about their past experiences. They could speak out about their trauma from the genocide, and from other time periods of their lives. The trust that was built over time is what

helped each woman reach a mental stability that assisted them during their reconciliation process with one another over any wrongs that may have been committed during the genocide.

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